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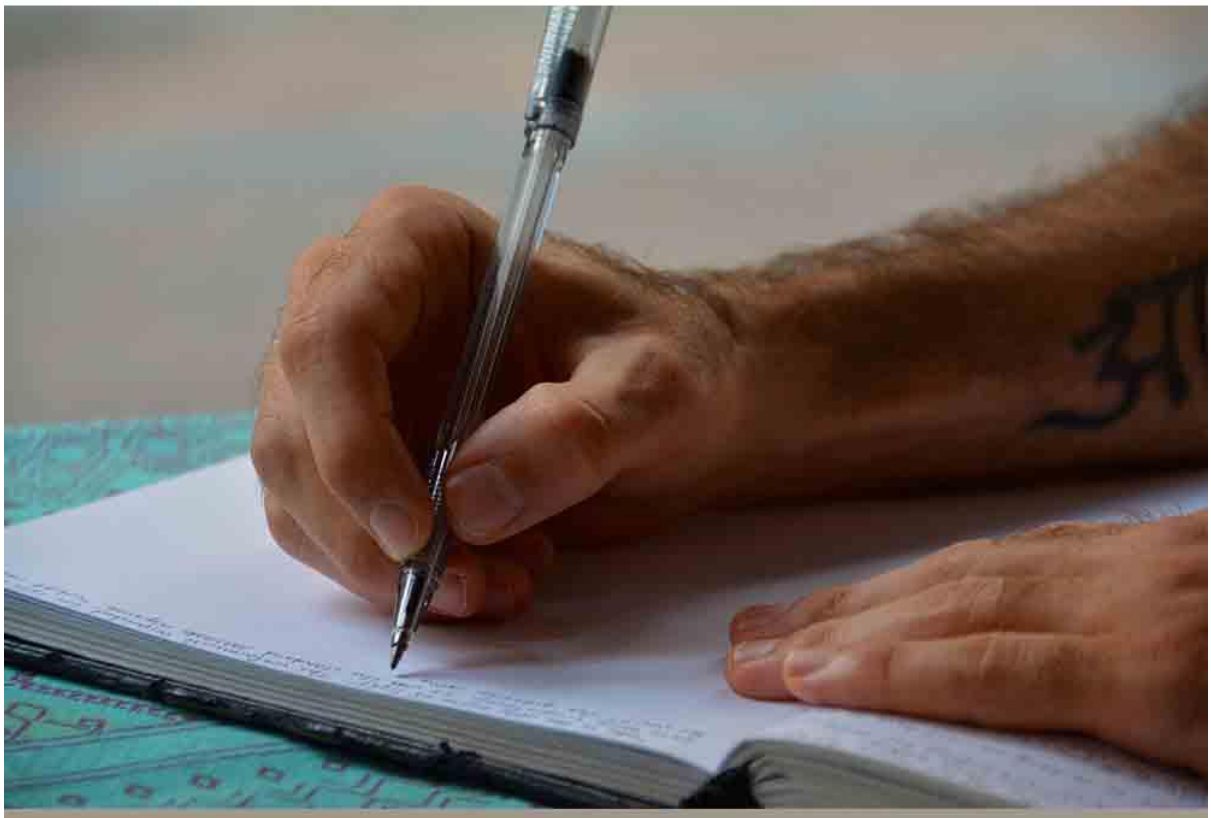

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A Journey from LIFE to Life:

How travel can change the life of an absurd man; a study based on Ben Stiller's movie 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

Abstract

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' portrays an educated middle class man, Walter Mitty, who can be considered as a representative of the modern man living in a futile world. He lives a dull life and he frequently shifts into the world of dreams and action rich scenario in order to escape from the harsh realities of his monotonous life. He is working for a magazine called LIFE and when his job is threatened, he sets out for a real adventurous and action packed journey to fulfil the existence of his own life. This paper intends to show a parallelism between Walter Mitty and the modern man who tries to find meaning in life from the external sources rather than initiating his action. Walter Mitty has break out from his constrained existence in LIFE (the magazine) to explore the true essence of his own life which he has gained through the experiences and situations in the course of his travelling.

Key words: travel, modernism, absurd, life, Walter Mitty.

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty is 2013 American adventure drama film which tells the story of a middle aged man with a rich fantasy life. This film is an adaptation of James Thurber's short story The Secret Life of Walter Mitty. Each of the roles that James Thurber chooses for Mitty speaks more about what the author intended to convey about Mitty than the actual story itself. Directed and starring by Ben Stiller, the film presents Walter Mitty as a representative of the modern henpecked man, who escapes from the routine drudgery of his suburban life into fantasies of heroic conquest. Like every modern man Walter Mitty is also confined to his own restricted and self-centred life. He always has a quest for a life of adventure and action but his dull life and his responsibility towards his family has kept him away from those exuberant actions. All his emotions and desires are fulfilled through his world of fantasy. That is why, we can see that at every point of adventure and action, he turns towards his illusionary life where he can imagine and act beyond the limits of his physical world. The story shows us how the monotonous life of Walter Mitty has changed as a result of his exploration into the world through the wings of travel.

When the movie begins we can see that Walter Mitty is one among the ordinary men who is acquainted with the office-home-office cyclical routine of life. He is working as negative asset manager in a well known journal called LIFE for the past sixteen years. The motto of this magazine can be considered as the motto of the whole movie:

To see the world, things dangerous to come to

To see behind the walls, to draw closer

To find each other and to feel

That is the purpose of LIFE.

Walter Mitty's job is in crisis when he has missed the negative of the last cover photo of the magazine and this can be considered as a turning point in his life. Sean O'Connel

is the famous photographer who has admired Mitty a lot and as the last work for the magazine, he has gifted Mitty with the negatives and a wallet with LIFE's motto on it. The misplaced negative, which is negative number twenty five is referred as the quintessence of life by Sean himself and actually we can consider it as the quintessence of Walter Mitty. It is for this negative Walter Mitty has decided to explore the world in search of Sean. In the course of the movie we can see that Mitty has transformed from ordinary to something extraordinary as he has followed the motto of LIFE and established his own self through travel.

Cheryl Melhoff is Mitty's crush and she is the one who encourages him to explore the world. Initially Mitty don't even have the courage to express his love toward Cheryl. But toward the last part of the movie we can see that he has hold her hand and walk towards their new life. This inability to act is the major problem for the modern man. As a representative of America's 'dark ages', Mitty represents the apt cynical modern man who has lost the value of his own life. This story paves a way for the modern society to their self identification through travel. Travel increases the scope in one's life by exposure to a different setting and people. Only through travel we can realise that we are only a very small part of this world. Travel allows us to interact with many peoples and many situations and thus nourishes the perfect human in each one of us.

Due to the crisis in his job Walter Mitty has made his mind to find Sean and he gets a clue that Sean is in Greenland. Then with the push of Cheryl, Mitty decides to crack the case. Within no time he has took his flight to Greenland and there he sees certain weird men and this is the first time to our knowledge that Mitty is encountering men of different nation and culture. In Mitty's case experience has a lot of things to do. It helps in the development of his personality. In Greenland, he finds that Sean has left the place some hours ago. Also Mitty find out one of the photographs Sean has sent him as the negatives. So those negatives act as

leads to find Sean. The picture is the thumb of a fat drunken middle aged man whom Mitty finds in Greenland. From that man, Mitty finds out that Sean has moved in ship to some other places and now the man is going to deliver radio parts to that boat. So again the hope in Mitty rises and he plans to go with the drunken man. As the helicopter reaches the boat, Mitty finds out that there is no helipad. So he has to jump into the boat from the helicopter and while doing so he has fallen into the sea and has a fight with the shark. All these things are the spurs of actions in Mitty. He is in search of the meaning of his own life and for that he has encountered different life situations. Later, he only dreams in the moments where action is needed. But now his fantasy life has lessened and his actions are elevating. Here, we can see that travel has taken Walter Mitty to a different level of life. After the heroic deeds in the sea, Mitty finds that Sean has left the boat to Iceland. Mitty does not hesitant to go to Iceland and he points his journey to a volcano 'Ejja fallajokull', as he learns that Sean may be there. There during the eruption of the volcano Mitty has seen Sean from a long distance but he could not make it to Sean. Mitty has got more clues but he has to return home because the condition in his office is so worse. Thus Mitty decides to go back to his normal life .he is so desperate and he lost the job with a mark of inefficiency and he returns his home and throws the wallet that Sean has gifted him into the waste bin.

In the home, he has found the next photograph of the series, which is the corner of his mother's piano. Here we can see that a part of his search always lie latent in his own home. Every man searches for the meaning of life outside himself without recognising that a part or the whole of it may be within him. Then Mitty comes to know that Sean has visited his mother before he gifted him with the negatives and Mitty's mother has told him the exact place where he can find Sean. This is a point of deviation for Mitty and here comes the role of family and relationships.

Mitty has again started his journey as fresh as ever and he has taken his backpack and his travel diary which he has never used. Here itself we can see the transformation of Walter Mitty. A man who has nothing to note in his 'been there done that' column has now taken his travel diary to note down the places and experiences he come across. Finally Mitty has seen Sean in the Himalayas. There he is eagerly waiting for the appearance of the 'ghost cat' which will happen rarely. Mitty has asked for the negative and is shocked to hear that it was in the wallet which Sean has gifted him. Thus Mitty has lost all his hope.

When the 'ghost cat' appears Sean does not take its photograph and he tells "Beautiful things do not ask for attention". He wants to stay in that moment without the obstruction of even the camera. Sean is a new lesson for Walter Mitty. Sean tells that the negative twenty five "was a beauty" and in the note to Mitty Sean has mentioned to "look inside" but that is what Mitty has not done so far.

But fate has another play as Mitty's mother has saved his wallet. Mitty has produced the negative to his office, which is the last cover photo of the journal and when the magazine is published Mitty find out that it was his own picture. That is what Sean finds as the most beautiful thing in the world. The last issue of the magazine is dedicated to the people who made it. Mitty has thus found out that his life is within himself. The beauty and charm of his life is within his own arms. Travel has changed him and taught him to look upon himself. Thus he has moved out of LIFE to follow the real charm of his own life, to explore the world and his own self.

Travel has done many miracles in the life of human beings. In this case of Mitty travel has exposed him to the various life situations which he has to face by himself. Thus through experiences and interactions Mitty has transformed into a 'new man'. Now he has aims in his life. Rather than burying his feelings and actions he can now execute things well as a perfect human being and that is the most essential part for a valuable life. Only through travel and

experience we can build ourselves as the pillars of our society. So it is high time to establish our own identity through exploration into the heart of the world.

Work Cite

The Secret Life of Walter Mitty. Dir. Ben Stiller. Samuel Godwyn Films, 2013.Film.